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Torah: A Way of Life called Episcopate

Mark Dyer, to the House of Bishops

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I have been asked by the Kanuga Planning Committee and the Presiding Bishop to present a theological reflection on a way of life called episcopate.

(I)
A Story from the Tradition
Bishop Cyprian and the Unity of the Church

Let me begin this narrative of Christian community and bishops with a story of a beleaguered bishop whose issues are familiar to us.

Cyprian's election as bishop won applause and trouble. The people of his diocese applauded; elder presbyters, however, joined by righteous folk from other dioceses, began to stir up trouble.

Issues of ecclesiastical pride and envy soon faded, though, beneath the outbreak of severe persecution of the Church. The Roman Emperor Decius demanded that all people offer sacrifice to his worthy self. On the run from Roman authorities, Cyprian tried to be for his people both a pastor and an effective sign of unity. He was convinced that the Church would grow even in persecution if pastoral practice was guided by sound doctrine.

This was no easy task. Among the people in his diocese — Carthage — were:

- surviving family members of those who gave their lives for the faith;
- those who sacrificed to the emperor god even before they were forced to do so;
- those who left the faith because of the love of property and social status;
- imprisoned and tortured confessors who were interceding for the lapsed, especially for those who after great torture gave in to the emperor;
- the orthodox self-righteous who were demanding severe penance for the fallen;
- Christians who bribed Roman authorities to get certificates of sacrifice.

This was the context in which Cyprian was to do his theological reflection. It was this context that produced the Church's first intentional ecclesiology, *De Unitate Ecclesiae*. It includes Cyprian's vision of bishop, episcopate and Christian community.

Cyprian focuses on the ministry of the bishop as the bond of unity between the local diocese and the Church universal. He stresses the conciliar and collegial character of the episcopate. Bishops are led to a common mind and a common expected way of life when in community they seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. To the question of how bishops should make collegial decisions, Cyprian maintains that it is not the number of votes that matters but the harmony achieved by those who pray. (*De Unitate,* 12)

He writes in his commentary on prayer:

> Our prayer is public and common; and when we pray, we pray not for one, but for the whole people, because the whole people are one. The God of peace and teacher of concord, who taught unity, willed that one thus prays for all, even as He Himself bore us all in one. (*De Dominica oratione,* 8,5)

For Cyprian it is not counting votes that sustains community; it is prayer, a prayer that is "public and common... for the whole people, because the people are one." I see in Cyprian that magnificent vision of Cranmer, "Holy Book, Holy People, Book of Common Prayer."

Because of and in the strength of common prayer, solidarity in community among bishops is essential to the character of the Church. "The episcopate is a single whole, of which each bishop has a right to and a responsibility for the whole." (*De unitate,* 5) The bishop is the personal bond of unity between each local church and all other churches. "There is one church throughout the whole world divided by Christ into many members. Also one episcopate diffused in a harmonious multitude of many bishops." (*Epis.* 55:34)

Cyprian also speaks, in this letter, of the serious consequences of separation from the community of bishops.

> He, therefore, who observes neither the unity of the Spirit, not the bond of peace, and separates himself from the bond of the Church and from the college of bishops can have neither the power nor the honor of a bishop since he has not wished either the unity or the peace of the episcopate. (*Epis.* 55/24)

For Cyprian the essence of the Church as community, as the Body of Christ, requires the clear doctrine and practice of episcopal collegiality.

> It is particularly incumbent upon those of us who preside over the Church as bishops to uphold this unity firmly and to be its champions so that we may prove the episcopate to be itself one and undivided. (*De unitate, 4*)

Do not forget the context in which Cyprian did his theology. On September 14, 258, Cyprian was beheaded by the Roman authorities. He was the first African bishop martyr.

I offer this story of Bishop Cyprian and his theological vision of the Church and the ministry of bishop as one from which the Church has drawn its understanding of the episcopate.

Cyprian's words from the distant past recall recent memories from the Book of Common Prayer, memories as recent as the last episcopal ordination we participated in.

> A bishop in God's holy Church is called to be one with the apostles in proclaiming Christ's resurrection and interpreting the Gospel and to testify to Christ's sovereignty as Lord of lords and King of kings. You are called to guard the faith, unity and discipline of the Church. With your fellow bishops you will share in the leadership of the Church throughout the world.
>
> Will you guard the faith, unity and discipline of the Church? Will you share with your fellow bishops in the government of the whole Church? Are you persuaded that God has called you to the office of bishop. (BCP 517-518)

(II)
The Biblical Story
Self-disclosure, Covenant and *Torah*

Enough now of one of those three legs of the Anglican way of doing theology, the way of the received Tradition. Now to a second leg — a quick look at the essence of community in the biblical story.

The bible tells the story of self-disclosure, covenant and *torah* — three elements so vitally related to one another that the death of one will signal the death of all.

God's intimate and vulnerable self-disclosure leading to covenant and *torah* — hence, community — is the oldest story in the bible. It is the story of God's first love. Remember, first, the scene described in the Book of Exodus, chapter 3, where Moses discovers and approaches the bush that appears to be burning. He hears God say to him:

> Moses, I need to tell you who I am. I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses, I need to tell you more of who I am. I have observed the misery of my people, I have heard their cry, I know their suffering, I have come to deliver them.

God's intimate and vulnerable self-disclosure occurs in history and creates community in an event of history when God reaches down and embraces an enslaved, marginalized, powerless people and says to them, "You are my chosen."

A new community is created in the self-disclosure of God in history. Later, freed from Egypt, in that place of questions, the desert, Moses is asked to explain what has happened. He responds:

> For you are a people holy to the Lord, your God; for the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all people. It was because the Lord loved you. (Deut. 7: 6-8)

Israel's identity as a community flows directly from God's self-disclosing acts in history. Israel's self-definition as community is gift from God:

> You are a people holy to the Lord, you are chosen, God's treasured possession, God's heart is set upon you, God's beloved.

Stephen Bayne once wrote:

> God put freedom into His created universe in order that the universe could respond to his love with an answering love of its own.... He put into the created universe a principle of choice; and He paid a two fold price for that.
>
> First, He limited his own freedom to have everything His own way. Second, He committed Himself to having to win out of freedom what He could perfectly easily have commanded as a right.

Why did God do this? He did it because God is love, and because love needs an answering love for love's sake." (quoted from an unpublished meditation by John Booty, *The Church is a Fellowship in the Love of God,* given at the House of Bishops meetings, 1987.)

The gift of vulnerable, intimate self-disclosure needs an answering love for love's sake. The Bible calls this answering love, this relationship, Covenant. God's self-disclosure and Israel's free acceptance of God's gift results in a communion of life. *Leviticus* puts it this way:

> I will place my dwelling in your midst .... and I will walk among you and will be your God and you shall be my people. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be slaves no more. (Lev. 26: 13)

Moses would say:

> Hear O Israel. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. (Deut. 6: 4-6)

"Keep these words that I am commanding you in your heart." God's intimate and vulnerable self-disclosure and Israel's free acceptance of God's gift in covenant requires something more. Self-disclosure and covenant require clear expectations of mutual behavior. It is simply insanity to expect intimate self-disclosure and covenant to happen without very clear expectations of mutual behavior.

The bible calls these clear expectations of mutual behavior *torah*. The scriptures of Israel tell the story over and over again of how the people struggled with *torah*. Virtually every book of Israel's scriptures tells of this regulation and that regulation, fidelity and infidelity. The very struggle reveals how crucial *torah* is. For *torah* is an event of commitment and fidelity in community.

Rabbi Heschel writes:

> The Bible taught us that life without commitment is not worth living; that thinking without roots will bear flowers but no fruit. Our commitment is to God and our roots are in the prophetic events of Israel.
>
> The dignity of man stands in proportion to his obligations as well as his rights. The dignity of being a Jew is in the sense of commitment, and the meaning of Jewish history revolves around faithfulness to the covenant. (A. J. Heschel, *God In Search of Man*, Harper & Row, New York, 1955, p. 216)

One striking example of the vital connection between God's self-disclosure, covenant and *torah* is found in Jeremiah.

> I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness in a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord... What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me and went after worthless things and became worthless themselves....
>
> The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord?" Those who handle the law did not know me. Therefore once more I accuse you, says the Lord. (Jeremiah 2:2-9)

It is clear from the Scriptures that the authority and power of the prophet finds its source only in God, covenant and *torah*. Rabbi Heschel writes:

> The soul of the prophet is a mirror to God. To share the faith of a prophet means more than perceiving what common sense fails to perceive; it means 'being' what common people fail to be: a mirror to God. To share the faith of a prophet means rising to the level of his existence. (*God in Search of Man*, p. 249)

The prophetic authority and power to stand for justice, righteousness, peace on the side of the oppressed and poor comes from the fact that the prophet stands in the midst of a divine event, an event in the very life of God. So Isaiah cries out:

> Is not this the fast (that I the Lord God) choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked cover them?" (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Every community of people is created, nurtured and sustained by the blessed trinity of intimate, vulnerable self-disclosure, covenant and *torah*.

On the night before he died Jesus created the new-covenant community in the deepest and most vulnerable act of self-disclosure.

> No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. (John 15:13-17)

This is the self-disclosure of a God who suffers with us, for us and even at our hands but always on our behalf. This is the covenant of death and resurrection with a God who calls us friends because all has been made known. This is the *torah* of a God whose only command is that we love one another as he has loved us.

All this takes me back to the biblical story where we began, to God telling Moses: "I have observed the misery of my people, I have heard their cry, I know their suffering, I have come to deliver them."

The cost of intimate self-disclosure reaches its climax for God on the cross. Von Balthasar has written:

> Jesus on the cross reveals the love of God up to that last inarticulate cry in which everything is said and everything witnessed to. Jesus the Word of God is exhausted to the point of silence. The time of death and silence becomes the supreme expression of the love of God offered to humanity. (Von Balthasar, *Dieu a parlé un langage d'homme,* in *Liturgie,* Paris, 1958, pg. 78)

The final gift of God's *I Am* in Jesus creates a new community, a new covenant, a new *torah.* We are called to be bishops in that community of self- disclosure, covenant and *torah,* the community of the crucified and risen Lord.

(III)
Reason's Reflection on *Torah* as a way of life called Episcopate

We have told the story from the tradition — the life, teaching and martyrdom of St. Cyprian. We have searched the scriptures for the story of God's self-disclosure, covenant and *torah* that constitutes holy community. Now we move to that third essential element of the Anglican way, reason's reflection on the spirit filled stories of God's People.

Anglican theology begins with story, with personal stories of God and life in the world. Our stories are of Jesus Christ, the focused vision of God, seen through the smoked glass of history. We bishops uncover our stories at home. Each of us comes from a diocese with its own peculiar context and culture. We are formed by our dioceses; and the needs of our dioceses are, in Christ, our needs. To be faithful we must listen to the stories at home and respond as Christ would respond.

Yet, at the same time, we are also called "with our fellow bishops to share in the leadership of the Church throughout the world... to guard the faith, unity and discipline of the Church." (BCP 517) As St. Cyprian put it:

> It is particularly incumbent upon those of us who preside over the Church as bishops to uphold this unity firmly and to be its champions so that we may prove the episcopate is one and individual. *(De unitate* 5)

We represent the local community and we represent the episcopate. The tension this creates is good for it is a necessary element in growth and in understanding the will of God for us. We need to live through the personal suffering this tension causes. We need to enter into each others stories, into each others pain and anguish. We need to suffer with one another until we discover the holy in what we are saying to one another. When this kind of suffering and sharing happens in Christ, community happens; the discernment of God's will takes hold of each of us together; and clear, agreed upon expectations of community life emerge.

This kind of community happens through self-disclosure, covenant and *torah.* It happens when we take the risk to tell our story; it happens when these stories are told in the context of the covenant we made with God and one another the day we were ordained bishops. Community happens when there is a clearly defined and agreed upon *torah,* a way of life called the episcopate.

What I am talking about can be put in very simple terms: "We have agreed. One of us cooks the meal. The other does the dishes." Two people have come to intimate community life because they became vulnerable and told their stories to one another. Their story telling became such a delight that they made a covenant with one another to live together for life. Then they began the task of *torah.* They clarified and agreed upon their expectations of mutual behavior. Trust deepened and stories were even more intimately shared. We call their clear and agreed upon expectations of mutual behavior *torah.*

Individual choices and concerns, personal issues, will forever make an impact on these clear expectations of mutual behavior and will cause *torah* in time to be modified. When expectations of mutual behavior are clear and fully agreed upon by the covenant partners, however, love is deepened, covenant becomes sacred and change happens with a minimum of sacrifice and suffering. The opposite is also true. When people who live together are confused about expectations of each other, self-disclosure becomes argument, self-sacrifice for others becomes a power struggle to win and covenanted life becomes a fiction. From our experience of pastoral ministry we know this to be sadly true.

Human community is established, nurtured and sustained by self-disclosure, covenant, and clear expectations of mutual behavior. When any one of these three breaks down, all suffer. When one dies, all die. Community dies. It is simple as "One of us cooks the meals; the other does the dishes."

(IV)
Spirit-filled Stories Create Community

I offer a final story of how spirit filled stories create community.

We sat at tables -- Primates and members of the Anglican Consultative Council meeting together for the first time. I sat with persons from Nigeria, England, South India, Central Africa, Papua New Guinea, Burma, Australia, Ireland and the West Indies.

We were "being in communion" — no trappings of hierarchy, power, subordination.

We prayed Morning Prayer, sang our hymns, and spent an hour each morning listening to the word of God and the stories of one another. The controlling theological rubric for table and conference was *A Transforming Vision: Suffering and Glory in God 's World.*

The most significant virtue required of us at table was to listen with humility to spirit-filled, local stories. As good Anglicans, we kind of fell into theology. We didn't devise it from above.

Lady Brenda Shields, a brilliant attorney from Northern Ireland, daughter of an Anglican priest, married to a Roman Catholic judge on the Supreme Court in Belfast, told us how for two years she and her husband and their 10-year-old son have not gone anywhere without the assistance of four armed guards. Because of their commitment as a family to establish justice in Northern Ireland they endure this imprisonment.

We heard the story of the archbishop and three priests from the Sudan who walked for two weeks to the closest airport — sleeping in the fields — because they thought it important to be part of our Anglican Communion meeting.

Archbishop Yona Okoth of Uganda, an extraordinarily attractive man whose face always reflected the smile of God, said he wanted to publicly thank the Episcopal Church, USA. With our financial and personnel support and the cooperation of the United Nations, Uganda has begun to face and attack the development of AIDS. Some 10% of Uganda's 18 million persons have the HIV infection.

African bishops, as late at the 1988 Lambeth Conference, were in denial about the AIDS crisis among them. "I was one of those," Archbishop Yona said. Then he took the lead in our resolution that urged "all governments, all churches, all religious bodies to do all in their power to fight this killer of our people."

Other stories came to us from the Sudan and from Palestine, stories of incredible oppression people live with. We heard all the stories within our biblical communion of hope and strength and love.

Anglican spirituality begins with our stories — stories of people from parishes in our dioceses, our province and throughout the world. Our incarnation spirituality says that the story starts at home, but it never ends at home. It is carried theologically, in the best sense of the word, to a vestry meeting, to a diocesan council, to a general convention, to a primates and ACC meeting, to a Lambeth Conference. Agenda concerns of our Communion come from the local story.

Our stories are of Jesus, the focused vision of God, seen through the smoked glass of humanity. We move from local stories to global issues. Our stories are prayed about and discussed in biblical communion — before issues that touch us as a national church or as a worldwide communion are framed and resolutions voted upon.

One significant, overriding issue — Why an Anglican Communion? What essentially keeps us together? — was quickly dealt with at the very beginning of our meeting. With so many varied and diverse contexts, cultures, issues and concerns, why aren't we a federalized church, just nice people who share the same prayer book with various provincial characteristics?

The resounding answer was the answer I remember coming to us as we prepared the agenda for Lambeth '88. We're staying together because we're quite convinced it's God's will — and, therefore, our obligation to do something about it.

After telling and listening to stories, we ended up where we began. We knew deep in our hearts that God wants us to be together, in holy communion. Where else could we collect the stories and respond to them? For that is how the bible describes God and the People of God in community.

(V) Envisioning *Torah*

I have set before you a vision of a community where members make themselves vulnerable to one another by disclosing to one another who they understand themselves to be. Their self-disclosure then leads to a covenant that requires *torah,* clear expectations of mutual behavior.

What I mean to say simply is that there cannot be a human community, no less a Christian community, and certainly not a community of bishops without self-disclosure, covenant and *torah.*

May we continue, through discussion of the following questions, on our way toward a deeper understanding of this way of life we call episcopate.

1. Cyprian's vision for the community of bishops, as it finds expression in the *Book of Common Prayer* — "to guard the faith, unity and discipline of the church" — was born in a particular time and place. How in our time and place do we give expression to a vision of the episcopate?

2. This vision of the episcopate presents a community whose life blood flows from telling stories in a trinity of self-disclosure, covenant and *torah.* How does this inter-relationship of self-disclosure, covenant and *torah* correlate with your own experience?

3. This paper proposes that the dynamics of self-disclosure, covenant and *torah* find expression in the telling of stories within the context of our covenant with God. If the kingdom paradigm for community (and for episcopal community) is along the lines laid out in this paper — self-disclosure leading to covenant leading to *torah* — then:
   A. How must the house live differently? What must the house do differently? What must the house give up? Why?
   B. What effects might there be throughout ECUSA if the house began a church-wide, community-building effort along these lines? What might be the ramifications for how a diocesan community lives, for how a parish community lives?

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS: SESSION 4
Mark Dyer

1. Cyprian's vision for the community of bishops, as it finds expression the Book of Common Prayer - "to guard the faith, unity and discipline of the church" - was born in a particular time and place. How in our time and place do we give expression to a vision of the episcopate?

2. This vision of the episcopate presents a community whose life blood flows from telling stories in a trinity of self-disclosure, covenant, and torah. How does this inter-relationship of self-disclosure, covenant and torah correlate with your own experience?

3. This paper proposes that the dynamics of self-disclosure, covenant, and torah find expression in the telling of stories within the context with God. If the kingdom paradigm for community (and for episcopal community) is along the lines laid out in this paper - self-disclosure leading to covenant leading to torah - then:

   A. Can we become more methodologically conscious, sensitive, skilled and disciplined in recognizing Torah as regulative of our covenant life together? How? Could this be extended in an intentional way in our gatherings at the province level?

   B. How must the House live differently? What must the House do differently? What must the House give up? Why?

   C What effects might there be throughout ECUSA if the House began a church-wide community-building effort along these lines? What might be the ramifications for how a diocesan community lives, for how a parish community lives?